



U.S. Department of State



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U.S. Department of State



U.S. Mission Geneva

The “Istanbul Process for Combating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief” Implementing Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution 16/18 December Expert Level Meeting

Background

At the March 2011 session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), a breakthrough was achieved by the consensus adoption of HRC resolution 16/18 on “Combating Intolerance, Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization of, and Discrimination, Incitement to Violence and Violence Against, Persons Based on Religion or Belief.” Resolution 16/18 focuses on concrete, positive measures that states can take to combat religious intolerance rather than legal measures to restrict speech. In November, the entire UN membership endorsed this approach in New York when it adopted a similar resolution in the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly. (All of the steps called for are consistent with longstanding U.S. law and practice.)

In June 2011, pursuant to Resolution 16/18, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights hosted a panel discussion on “Countering Religious Intolerance.” In July 2011, the OIC co-hosted a High-Level Ministerial on Implementing Resolution 16/18 in Istanbul. This event, co-chaired by Secretary Clinton and OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu and attended by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Ashton and Ministers of Foreign Affairs and representatives from 20 nations, reaffirmed the participating parties' support for HRC Resolution 16/18 and its implementation.

As Secretary Clinton said in Istanbul in July 2011, “Under this resolution, the international community is taking a strong stand for freedom of expression and worship, and against discrimination and violence based upon religion or belief. These are fundamental freedoms that belong to all people in all places, and they are certainly essential to democracy.” A joint statement to mark the occasion called upon all relevant stakeholders throughout the world to take seriously the call for action set forth in HRC Resolution 16/18, which contributes to strengthening the foundations of tolerance and respect for religious diversity as well as enhancing the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms around the world.



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DIPLOMACY IN ACTION

Implementation Event

To kick off the Istanbul Process and spur implementation of the specific actions called for in Resolution 16/18, the United States will hold an expert-level meeting in Washington, D.C. on December 12-14, 2011. The United States will invite practitioners from foreign government agencies with comparable responsibilities to the U.S. Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Homeland Security (DHS) to discuss two recommended actions from Resolution 16/18: 1) effective government strategies to engage members of religious minorities and training of government officials on religious and cultural awareness, and 2) enforcing laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. The discussion on laws will include a review of laws currently in place.

To foster a genuine dialogue amongst participants, we invited representatives from a limited number of states and international organizations to participate in this first implementation event. Participants were selected based on past participation in international forum discussions about religious freedom and to provide geographic, religious, and political diversity. We note that future implementation events may call for a broader, or different, group of participants.

Subsequent to this first Istanbul Process meeting, the Department of State will compile a comprehensive report based on discussions outlining a set of recommendations and best practices to be submitted to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and for public distribution. Other U.S. efforts are envisioned to assist governments in the process of training their domestic employees in the concepts of religious engagement and cultural awareness and on enforcing laws prohibiting discrimination. We hope that this meeting will be the first in a series of working level experts meetings focused on sharing best practices and assessing implementation of each of the measures called for in Resolution 16/18.

It is the hope of the United States that in operationalizing the text of HRC Resolution 16/18, this Istanbul Process series of expert level meetings will turn our energies to seeking real and effective measures against bigotry, discrimination, and violence on the basis of religion or belief in the ways spelled out in Resolution 16/18, which are fully consistent with freedom of expression. It is deeply concerning that these problems persist in the 21st century in all regions of the world. As Secretary Clinton has stated, we must all step up efforts to combat these problems to make tangible improvements in people's lives.